

interesting

Joe Bustillos

Daily Titan

43 lines

book review: Robin Wright "In the Name of God: The Khomeini Decade"  
(Simon and Schuster, 258 pages)

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According to Robin Wright, former Los Angeles Times correspondent, it is this inability to appreciate or understand the Iranian mind set that has contributed to the numerous failures of United States foreign policy with Iran and the complex political turmoil of the Middle East.

In her book "In the Name of God: The Khomeini Decade" Wright attempted to remedy this deficiency.

Having first visited the Iranian capital of Tehran in 1973 when the city was the center of international trade and politics, Wright wanted to reconcile those memories with the images that came out of the country following the

7 Islamic revolution of 1979.

In 1973, jumbo jets were landing daily in Tehran from New York and Paris, Tokyo and Beijing. Westerners could stay at a Hilton or an Intercontinental, eat the finest French cuisine or Kentucky Fried Chicken, and play the night away at assorted nightclubs and casinos. . . All that changed in 1979. Over the next decade, a new set of images, strong and persistent, became synonymous with Iran: Hostage seizures. Suicide bombings. Teenagers serving as human minesweepers on the battlefield. Women hidden behind black chadors. Mullahs toting rifles and leading mobs in chants of "Death to America. . . I wanted an explanation of what had happened to Iran's long and proud traditions to explain this nightmare," she wrote in the prologue.

Rather than a sterile political assessment of the events that led up to and followed the revolution, Wright sought to get under the skin of the common Iranian and not just the political leaders. As such she interviewed Iranians of all walks of life. This attention to detail added a great deal of depth to her writing even though the events that she was chronicling involved the broad strokes of a revolution that continues to have political, religious and social implications.

Wright added, "Determining how Iranians really felt about their revolution was not easy. An Asian diplomat offered me some advice: "Don't make the mistake of thinking that the longer you've been here, the more you understand Iran. Most of our intelligence reporting has been wrong all along and not just since the revolution. Yours will be too. None of us understands the Iranians."



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#### Prologue:

"By 1973, jumbo jets were landing daily in Tehran from New York and Paris, Tokyo and Beijing. Westerners could stay at a Hilton or an Intercontinental, eat the finest French cuisine or Kentucky Fried Chicken, and play the night away at assorted nightclubs and casinos. As East and West vied for stronger political and economic ties with this Middle East oil power, Tehran became an enticing center of international trade and politics. 'All the themes of those spy novels set in Istanbul were actually taking place in Tehran,' a noted Iranian commentator once joked. The capital was the symbol of Iran's entry into the twentieth century.

"All that changed in 1979, when a revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini stripped Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi of his power and Iran of its vibrant reputation. Overnight, the newly austere Islamic Republic became off-limits, and the changes began. Over the next decade, a new set of images, strong and persistent, became synonymous with Iran: Hostage seizures. Suicide bombings. Teenagers serving as human minesweepers on the battlefield. Women hidden behind black chadors. Mullahs toting rifles and leading mobs in chants of "Death to America. . . I wanted an explanation of what had happened to Iran's long and proud traditions to explain this nightmare." (p. 20)

"Determining how Iranians really felt about their revolution was not easy. An Asian diplomat offered me some advice which he, in turn, had been given shortly after his posting to Tehran by another envoy: "Don't make the mistake of thinking that the longer you've been here, the more you understand Iran. Most of our intelligence reporting has been wrong all along and not just since the revolution. Yours will be too. None of us understands the Iranians." (p. 21)

"Understanding Iran, either as a revolution or as a monarchy, has not been easy for the West. We thought that we understood it once, but were chastened and then humiliated. 'You thought you understood Iran because the shah spoke English and because his cabinet had read Shakespeare,' an Iranian journalist told me in 1988. 'You thought he was good because you could see a reflection of yourself in him. But he understood Iran as little as you did, and that's why you both failed.'" (p. 22)

## 1. The Khomeini Revolution

"A Washington Post correspondent was sufficiently moved to write, 'Not since Lenin was sent across Germany in a sealed train in 1917 to Petrograd's Finland Station to lead the Bolsheviks against the czar has a revolutionary leader's return to his homeland seemed so full of portent as Khomeini's arrival in Iran.'

"A decade later those words seemed uncannily prescient. Only once before in this century had a revolution, the Russian upheaval, so stunned and frightened the outside world. None of the more than twenty revolutions in the Third World since World War II, including those in Cuba, Vietnam and Nicaragua, had reverberated with such energy or innovative potential. And only twice in modern history had political conventions been so shaken by a new ideology. In rejecting the Bourbons of France, the Jacobins of the eighteenth century introduced equality and civil liberty as the basis of modern democracy. The Bolsheviks of the early twentieth century overthrew the Russian Romanovs in favor of classless egalitarianism." (p. 38)

"On New Year's Eve 1977, six weeks after the memorial services for Mustafa Khomeini, President Jimmy Carter visited Tehran and toasted the shah for creating 'an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world. This is a great tribute to you, Your Majesty, and to your leadership, and to the respect, admiration and love which your people give to you.'" (p. 57)

## 2. Hostages and Purges

"Colonel Leland Holland, the stocky, muscular army attache at the American embassy in Tehran, recalled being uneasy in the first days of February 1979 following Khomeini's return. 'Armed bands of Komitehs and Revolutionary Guards were roaming the streets. There was no law, no order, and no respect for authority. It just kept getting rougher and rougher. I was shot at near the embassy gate. Every day it was getting more and more like Vietnam.'" (p. 60)

February 14, 1979, 10:30 A.M. - first embassy occupation (abortive)

November 4, 1979, 10:00 A.M. - sit-in, "The most striking aspect of the discourse on that first day ... was the enormous gap between the Iranians and the Americans after more than three decades of close relations between their governments." (p. 78)

## 3. God Against the Infidels

"Victory is not achieved by swords; it can be achieved only by blood. Victory is not achieved by large populations; it is achieved by strength of faith." Ayatollah Khomeini (p. 82)

Sept. '80 - versus Iraq ... miss-judge: "A CIA estimate predicted that Iran would last only three weeks against the Iraqi assault. Captains of a fleet of oil supertankers seemed to agree; they decided to drop anchor and wait until the war ended." (p. 83)

second battle in late November - Path to Jerusalem: "What made this small offensive so important ... was the strategy used---almost by accident. Basij volunteers and Revolutionary Guards ignored the battle plan that called for a heavy artillery barrage followed by a land assault. In their enthusiasm, the Basij and Pasdaran charged ahead without the advantage of 'softening' the enemy first. It marked the first human-wave assault, and it worked in overwhelming the better-trained and well-armed Iraqis. The Iranian strategy was almost primitive, but it was so effective that it changed the nature of the warfare for the next seven years.

"The new tactic was simple: Leading the attack were thousands of Basij, or 'the mobilized,' the poorly trained troops who ranged in age from their young teens to their mid-fifties. The teenage and geriatric warriors volunteered for temporary duty in-between school terms or to pick up extra pay at a time of serious economic shortfalls. Most came from the rural areas or from the most devout Shi'ite families. They were little more than cannon fodder or human minesweepers sent in advance of Iran's other military forces to clear the fields, desert scrublands and marshes. Their best weapons were often those they managed to pick up from among Iraqi casualties. The Basij were distinguishable from the regular forces by their tacky, leftover uniforms, mismatched boots, and the colorful red or yellow headbands that declared God's or Khomeini's greatness. Many also wore keys around their necks, a symbol of their automatic entry into heaven upon martyrdom. At the battle for Bostan, a hundred young Basij walked across a minefield to clear it for advancing Pasdaran troops." (p. 102)

#### 4. The Islamic Crusade

"We shall export our revolution to the whole world. Until the cry, 'There is no God but God' resounds over the whole world, there will be struggle." AK

June 12, 1982, Revolutionary Guards - Tehran to Damascus (1) Syrian border town of Zebdani (Noah's Ark/Adam's tomb/youth camp) (2) eastern Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, Saalbeck (old Lebanese army barracks) --- hostages; attack on Marine barracks

#### 5. The Road to Tehran

"The world is determined on the diplomatic scene. If we are not present, it will be determined without us." Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati

"It is not easy to sleep next to an elephant that you have wounded," Iranian official to Oliver North. (p. 130)

June 14, 1985, TWA Flight 847 - 3 days, 8,300-mile odyssey between Beirut and Algiers, Robert Dean Stetham, Amer. Navy diver killed. 39 American hostages, El Salvador 6 Amer. killed (including 4 marines), Air India bomb North Atlantic 329 killed; Frankfurt airport bombing 3 killed 42 injured; five bombs Nepal 7 killed 240 wounded ... "The United States needed, urgently, to prevent another prolonged mass-hostage episode, and Reagan had to be seen to be responding to this source." (p. 131)

#### 6. The Final Offensive

"We have enough enemies in the world. It is, frankly, not fair to ignore those enemies and to fight among ourselves," Parliamentary Speaker Rafsanjani. (p. 154)

Iran-gate: Jan 28, 1987, bible sent to Rafsanjani: "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All nations shall be blessed in you.' Galatians 3:8, Ronald Reagan, October 3, 1986" McFarlane's forged Irish passport (Sean Devlin) ...

#### 7. The Reckoning

#### Epilogue

June 3, 1989, Tehran Radio: "The lofty spirit of the leader of the Muslims and the leader of the noble ones, His Eminence Imam Khomeini, has reached the highest status, and a heart replete with love of God and his true people, who have endured numerous hardships, has stopped beating" (p. 204)

Chronology

Source Notes

Selected Bibliography